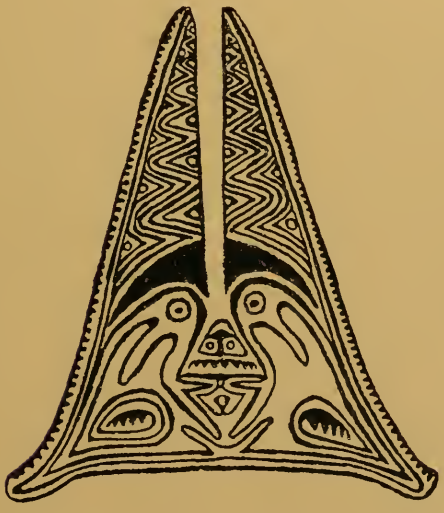
CARVED AND PAINTED DESIGNS FROM NEW GUINEA

BY

ALBERT BUELL LEWIS

ASSISTANT CURATOR OF MELANESIAN ETHNOLOGY

52 PLATES



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CURATOR, DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

EDITOR

ANTHROPOLOGY DESIGN SERIES NO. 5

FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

CHICAGO, U. S. A.

1931

1. VIEW OF SOME OUTLYING HOUSES AT UKIARAVI, PURARI DELTA
At the left are two with rear end toward the creek

2. INTERIOR OF RAVI AT MAIPUA, PURARI DELTA
At the left are two masks hanging from poles

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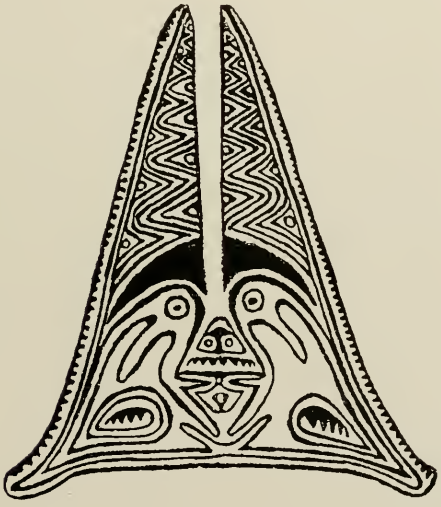

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CARVED AND PAINTED DESIGNS FROM NEW GUINEA

The major portion of the designs illustrated in this publication are from the Papuan Gulf, and show variations of the human face or figure. These are mostly incised designs on a flat or rounded surface. The carving of the human face or full figure in the round or in relief, so common on the north coast of New Guinea, in Huon Gulf, and the Massim district, is seldom found in this region, at least outside of the Orokolo district. There are two main centers of this art—one at Ukiaravi in the Purari Delta among the Namau people; and the other at Orokolo in the Elema district to the east, among the neighboring Ipi people. Masks, carved and painted boards, bull-roarers, and ornamented hand-drums are made in both regions; while ornamented wood shields, bark belts, carved coconut-shell spoons, and charms made of small coconuts come chiefly from the Elema district.

In both these districts the men's house (*ravi* in Namau, *eravo* in Ipi) is the center for this kind of work. This type of building is one of the largest and probably the loftiest to be found in New Guinea. The front may be eighty or more feet in height, but the roof slopes rapidly toward the rear, where it may be no more than five feet above the floor, which is probably six to twelve feet above the ground. The length may be as much as two hundred feet in the delta, somewhat less to the eastward. The front, among the Namau at least, is usually open, except for a screen of leaves across the lower part. The interior has a central passage, with alcoves on each side, each with its central fireplace, and occupied by several men. Here, along the partitions, and hung from the posts or rafters, may be seen the carved planks, masks, drums, and other objects belonging to the men (Plates I–VI). In the *ravi* the men spend most of their time, leaving the small family houses to the women and children.

Plates I–III and V illustrate interiors of Namau *ravis*. The carved and painted boards (*kohe*) might be called memorial tablets, as they are made to commemorate some event in the life of their owner or his family. On some of the tablets totemic figures are represented, and these are regarded as more sacred, prayers being made to them, and skulls (pig, crocodile, even human) are placed before or over them. Most of the designs seem to be conventional and without special meaning. The natives would never part with *kohes* already set up in the *ravi*, but would readily sell old ones that had been removed, or new ones that had not yet been set up. They said it would offend Kaia Imunu ("Soul of the Sky," their chief deity, represented by wickerwork images kept in a closed room at the rear of the *ravi*) if these *kohes* were taken away.

In the Elema district the carved boards and figures represent guardian spirits, and apparently are not so sacred, as the natives sold several that were set up in their *eravos*. The carved bark belts are often ceremonial, in which case the ancestral spirits concerned in the ceremony are represented on them.

The masks in both the Namau and Elema districts are quite similar in appearance and construction. Those illustrated (Plates XXIII–XXIV) are from the Elema district, and show the two types of ceremonial masks (*kovave* and *semese*). The *kovave* masks are worn by boys during the time of their initiation into manhood. Kovave, the "God of the Mountains," visits the village during these ceremonies, and the wearers of the masks, as they appear in the villages, are supposed to be his messengers. The masks are conical in shape with a bunch or row of cockatoo feathers on top, and a fringe of dyed grass or shredded leaves fastened to the lower edge, covering most of the body of the wearer. On the front is a face design, often with a projecting crocodilelike mouth (Plate XXIII, Figs. 2–3).

The *semese* is the most important festival or ceremony of this region, and is held not oftener than once in three years, largely on account of the expense and great labor of making the elaborate masks. The ceremonies last about ten days, during which there are numerous parades and tableaux representing various episodes in the life of the people. The masks represent their ancestors or guardian spirits, and usually bear designs or effigies sacred to them. In shape they are quite different from the *kovave*, with a large flat front and long, slender top piece, to which an effigy is often attached. Below is a face design, usually with projecting crocodile mouth or snout, while above are painted various conventional and totemic figures. On the side are earlike projections.

Both the *kovave* and *semese* masks are made of a light framework of split bamboo or rattan, covered with bark cloth—the inner bark of the mulberry tree beaten out till it is quite soft and thin. White, black, red, and yellow are used for the designs. For white, lime made from burnt oyster or clam shells is used; for red, burnt clay; for yellow, a natural yellow clay; and for black, soot or charcoal. All these are mixed with water, and put on with a brush made from a soft fibrous stick mashed and teased out at one end. White and black are the colors commonly used, with red and yellow in the more complicated designs. The same colors are used in painting the memorial tablets and ornamented shields.

For the bark belts a strip of bark about two and one-half feet long and from three to twelve inches wide is cut out, and the side to be carved is scraped and cleaned. After it has dried, the design is carefully cut in, at present with a knife, but formerly with an oyster shell sharpened on the edge. This oyster shell knife was the common knife used for all fine carving in this part of New Guinea. The coarser and heavier work in wood cutting and carving was done with stone axes and adzes.

After the incised designs have been finished, the original surface is usually blackened with wet charcoal, and the fine incisions filled with lime, thus causing the design to stand out sharply. This is done not only with belts, but also with the coconut charms (Plates XXXVII–XL), spoons (Plate XLII), and small wood carvings (Plates XXXV–XXXVI, XLV–XLIX, LII), while the narrower incisions and cuts of the larger wood carvings are often filled with lime instead of having a superficial wash. As this filling falls out rather easily, it is frequently renewed, especially for festal occasions. The design on the title page is from a

rubbing (three-tenths actual size) of a portion of the carved design on a hand drum (Plate XLI, second from the left). The ridge representing the nose shows as a clear space in the rubbing.

In the bark belts the ends overlap considerably. These are fastened together by means of a loop of rattan or cord (Plate XXVI, center), which is caught over a shell button (Plate XXV). The design runs from one fastening to the other, the two ends of the design being the same or very similar. The surface of the bark is quite rough, as may be seen from the photographs, and so the rubbings appear broken and uneven. These show a greater length of the design, however, as well as showing it in its proper proportions.

The painting of designs on bark cloth is not common in New Guinea. Its most extensive development is in connection with the masks of the Papuan Gulf. A few ornamental pieces, worn on festal occasions, are also found there (Plate LI, Fig. 1). In a few other parts of New Guinea ornamental designs are found on the overlapping front end of the men's loin cloths (Plates XLIX–LI, Fig. 2), and also, on the northeast coast of Papua, on women's bark skirts. Bark cloth dresses for women, however, are found in very few places in New Guinea, as the fiber skirt is almost universal.

The best ornamented bull-roarers are from the Huon Gulf (Plates XLVI–XLVIII), but the designs are somewhat similar to those from the Papuan Gulf (Plate XLV).

For comparison, two Plates (XLIV and LII) illustrating wood carving from the Massim district of eastern New Guinea are added. Further illustrations may be seen in No. 4 of this series. The fullest treatment of the art of Papua is given by A. C. Haddon, "Decorative Art of New Guinea" (Dublin, 1894).

For the life of the people of the Papuan Gulf, with a discussion of their arts, industries, and religion, consult "In Primitive New Guinea" by J. H. Holmes (New York, 1924).

Owing to the large size of many of the objects the designs are usually reproduced much smaller than they really are. As may be seen from the photographs taken in the men's houses, the wooden tablets vary considerably in size, but most of them will fall somewhere between three and five feet in length. The shields are about two and one-half to three and one-half feet in length. The rubbings of the bark belts are from one-half to three-fourths actual size.

1. INTERIOR OF RAVI AT UKIARAVI, PURARI DELTA
Showing central passageway, and the ends of the partitions separating the side alcoves

2. ONE OF THE SIDE PARTITIONS AT UKIARAVI, PURARI DELTA
With memorial tablets and pigs' skulls

1. INTERIOR OF RAVI AT KAIVARE, PURARI DELTA
Suspended from the posts are a number of hand-drums and masks

2. A PARTITION IN RAVI AT KAIRUO, PURARI DELTA
Showing masks with long fiber skirts (to cover body) at the left

1. TABLETS AND FIGURES IN ERAVO AT VAILALA, ELEMA DISTRICT

2. PARTITION WITH TABLETS IN RAVI AT UKIARAVI, PURARI DELTA

INTERIOR OF RAVI AT MAIPUA, PURARI DELTA
On each side in front are rolls of sleeping mats

SOME TABLETS IN ERAVO AT OROKOLO, ELEMA DISTRICT

Above at the right are bundles of arrows, hand-drums, and crude baskets

TABLETS FROM THE ELEMA DISTRICT
The center one is from Vailala, the other two are from Orokolo

TABLETS FROM OROKOLO (CENTER) AND MAIPUA

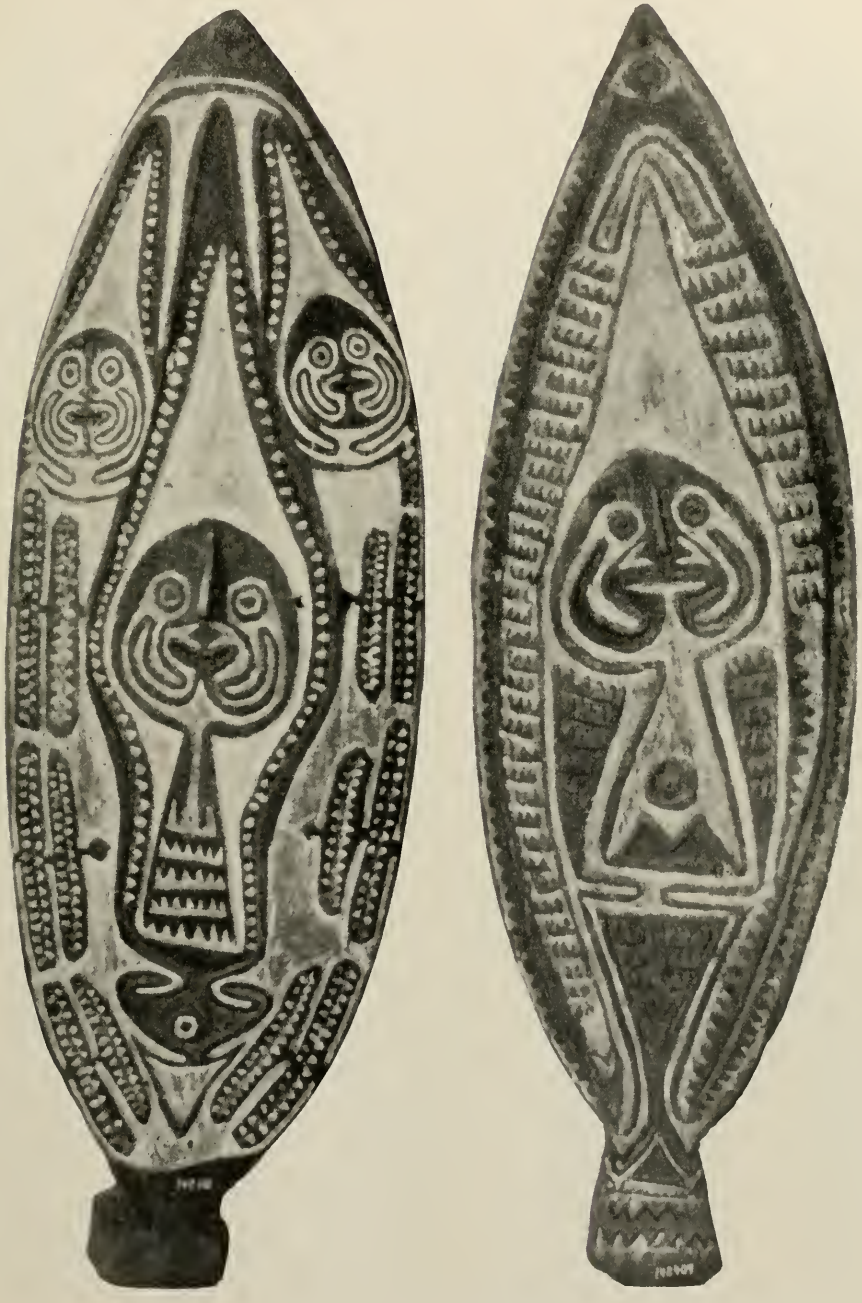
TABLETS FROM VAILALA (LEFT CENTER) AND KEREMA, ELEMA DISTRICT

TABLETS FROM OROKOLO (SECOND FROM RIGHT) AND KEREMA
The left three are hung in front of the *eravo*, and are for ornament only

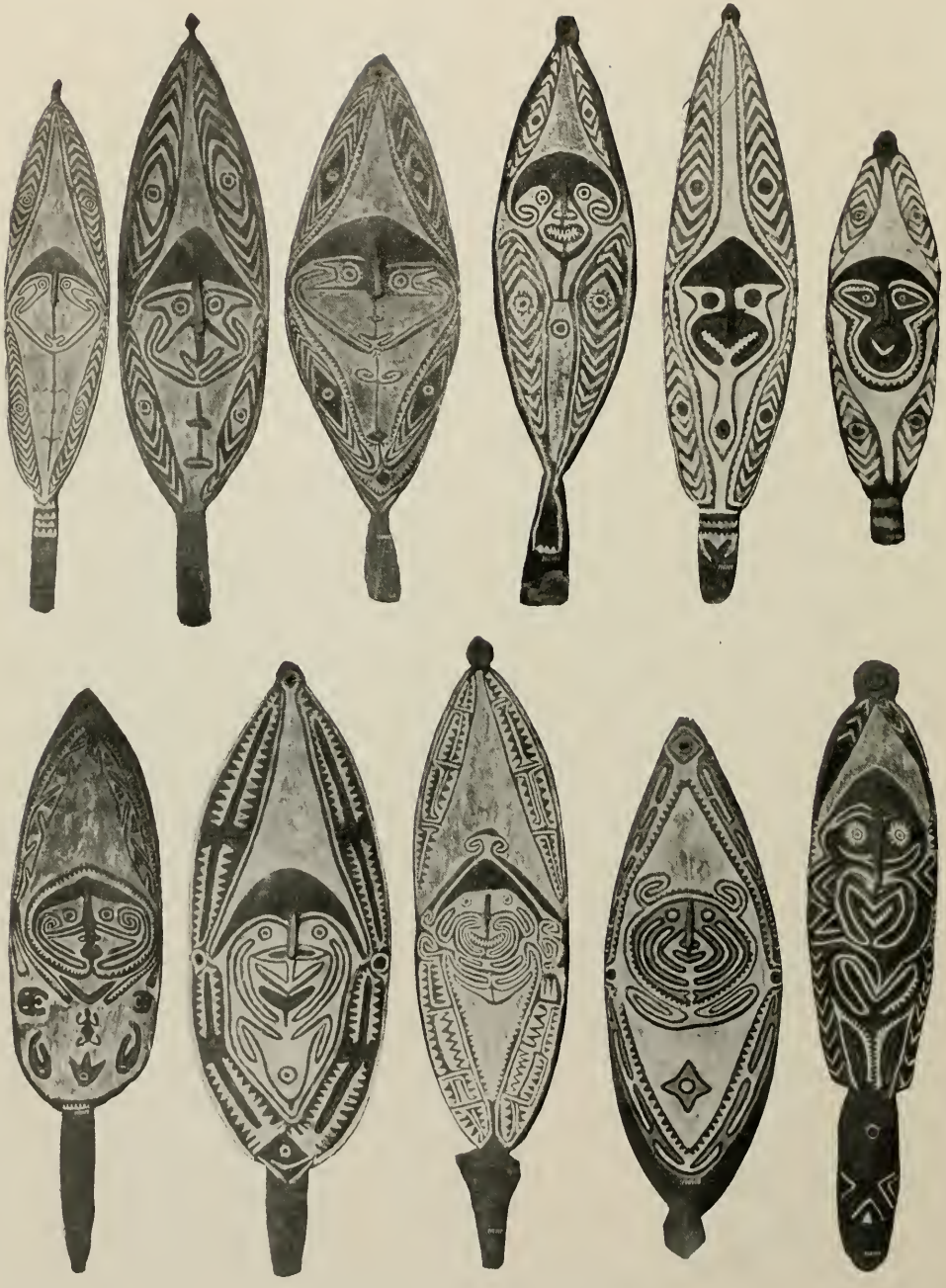
TABLETS (KOHE) FROM THE PURARI DELTA

TABLETS FROM THE ELEMA DISTRICT
The center one is from Kerema, the others are from Orokolo

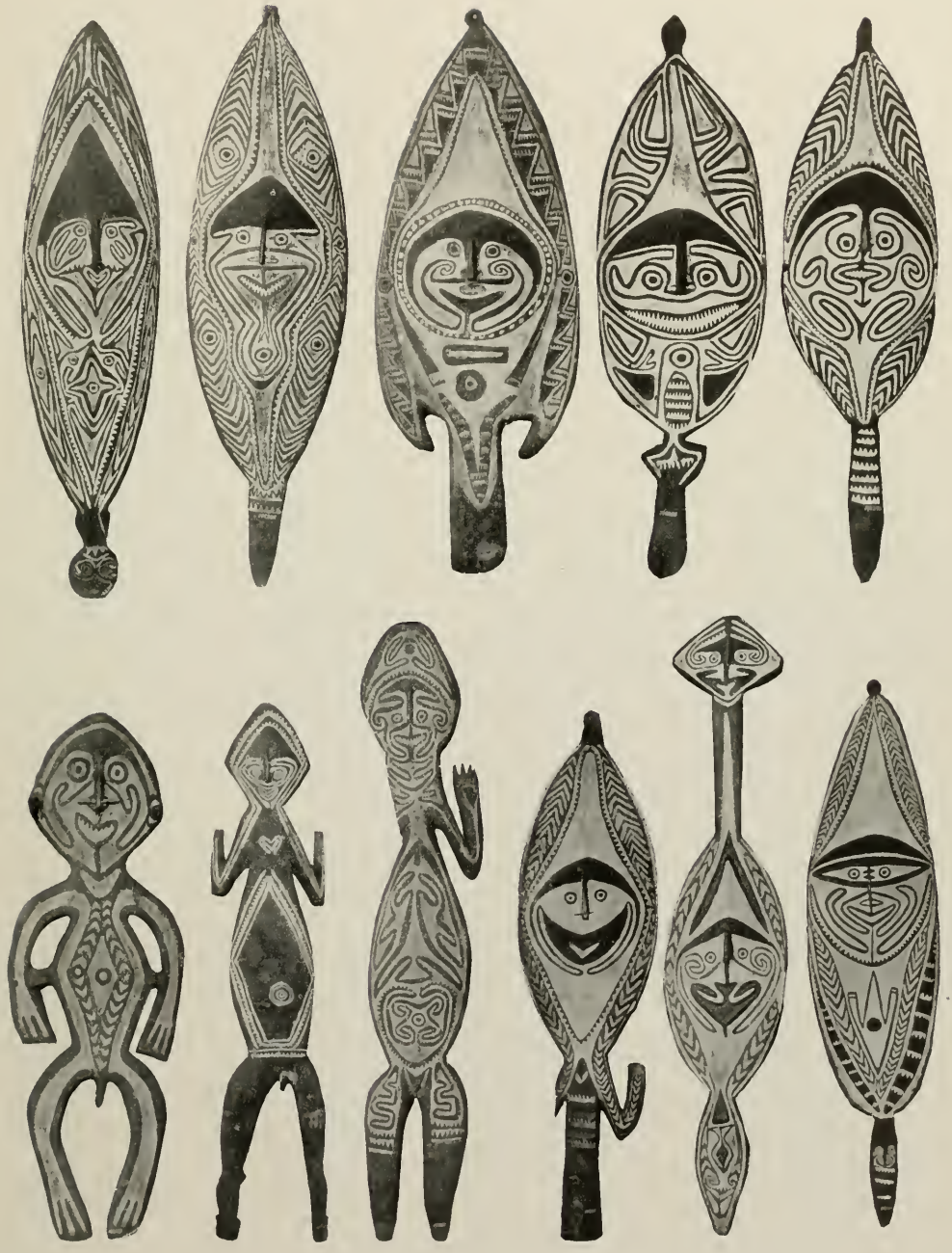
TABLETS FROM THE PURARI DELTA



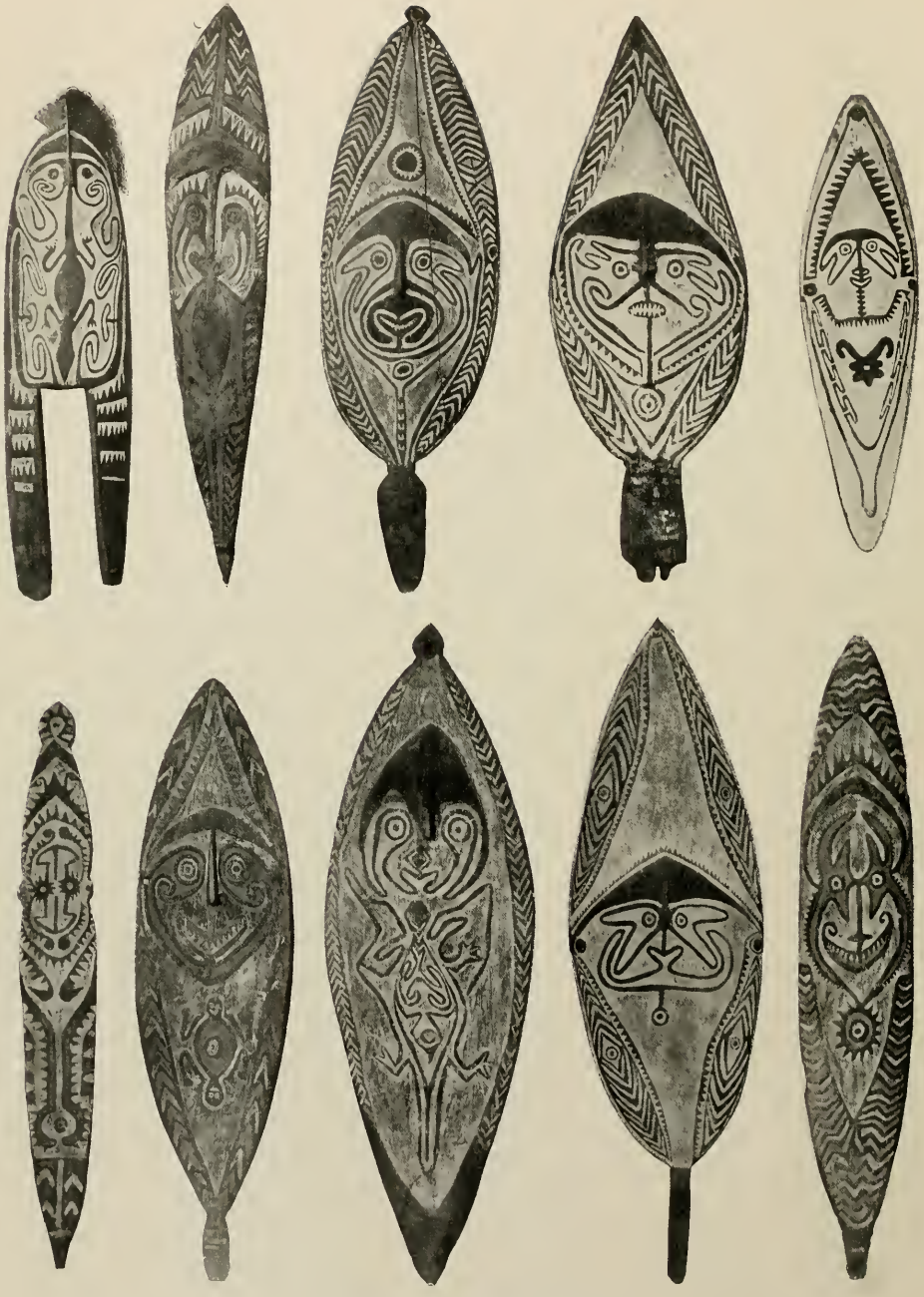
TABLETS FROM KAIVARE, PURARI DELTA



TABLETS FROM THE PURARI DELTA



TABLETS FROM THE PURARI DELTA



TABLETS FROM THE PURARI DELTA

Except three (one at each end of lower row and second from left in upper row) from Kerema

TABLETS FROM GOARI BARI, BEYOND THE NAMAU DISTRICT TO THE WEST

ORNAMENTED SHIELD, KEREMA

ORNAMENTED SHIELD, KEREMA

ORNAMENTED SHIELDS, KEREMA
Except lower center, which is a house ornament

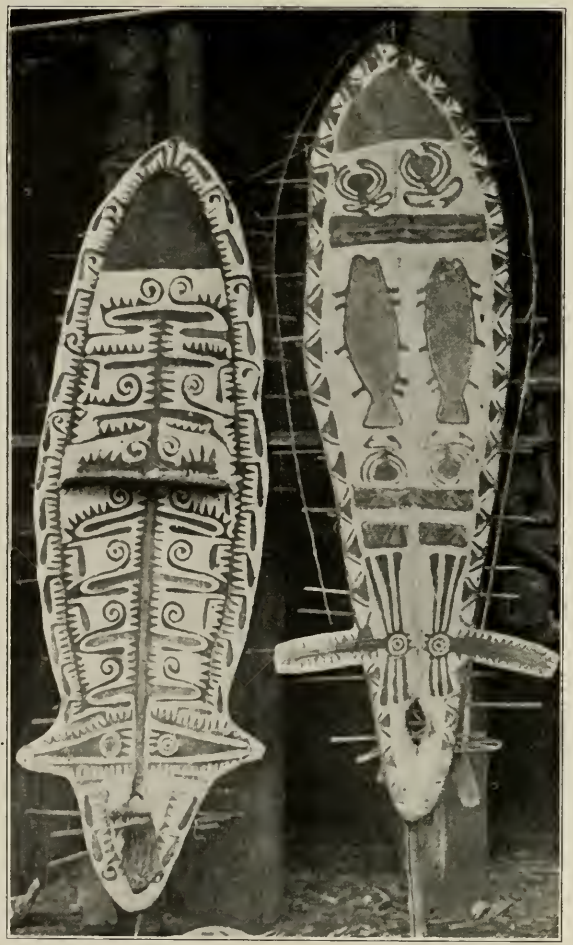
ORNAMENTED SHIELDS, KEREMA DISTRICT

1. MAN FROM MEKEO, WEARING AN OROKOLO BARK BELT

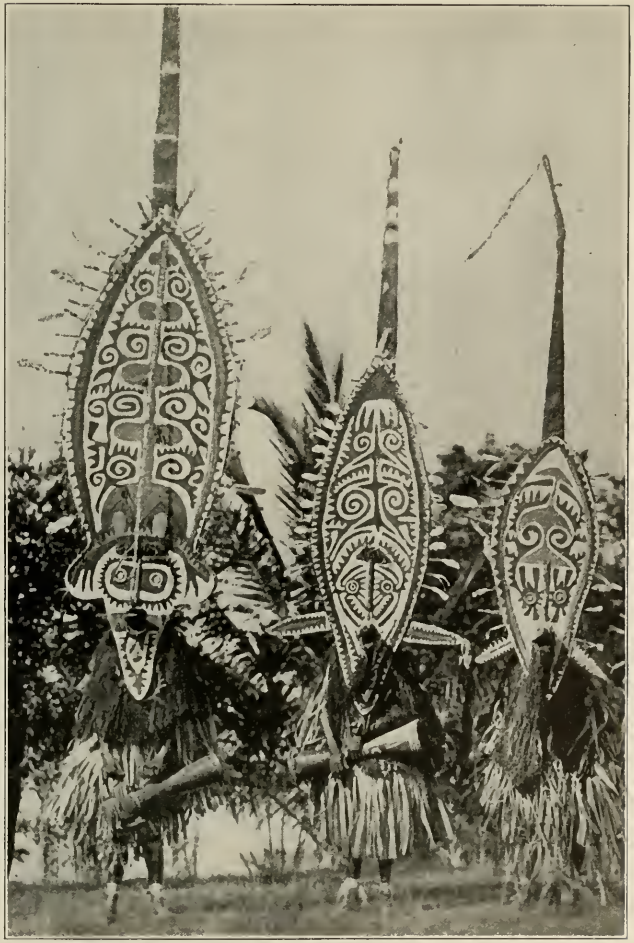
2. BOYS WEARING KOVAVE MASKS, OROKOLO

3. KOVAVE MASKS IN BOYS' HOUSE, OROKOLO

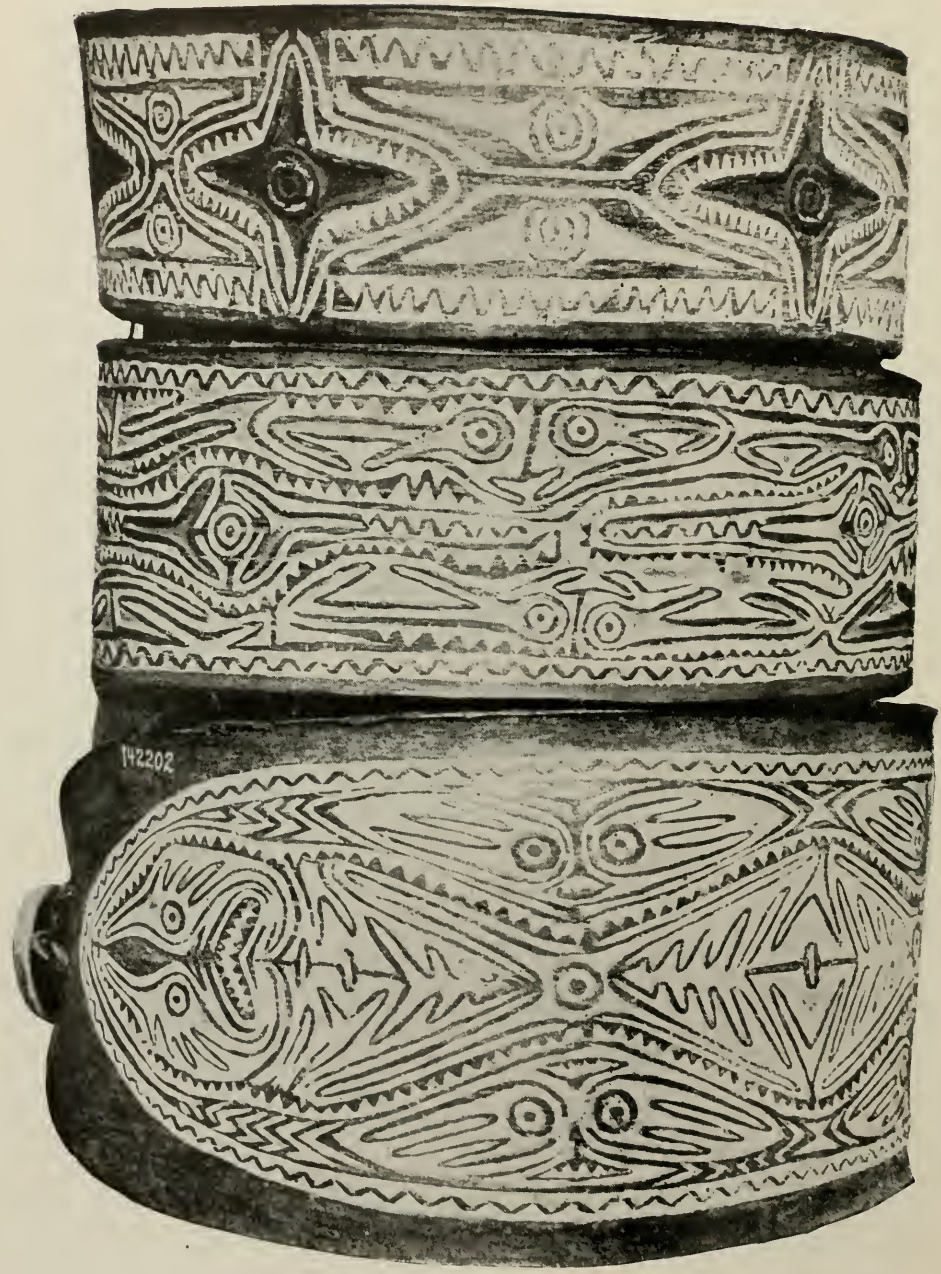
4. MAN WITH BOW AND ARROWS, CARRYING SHIELD, KEREMA DISTRICT



1. PAINTED BARK FRONTS OF TWO SEMESE MASKS, KIRI, KEREMA DISTRICT



2. THREE SEMESE MASKS AT KEREMA



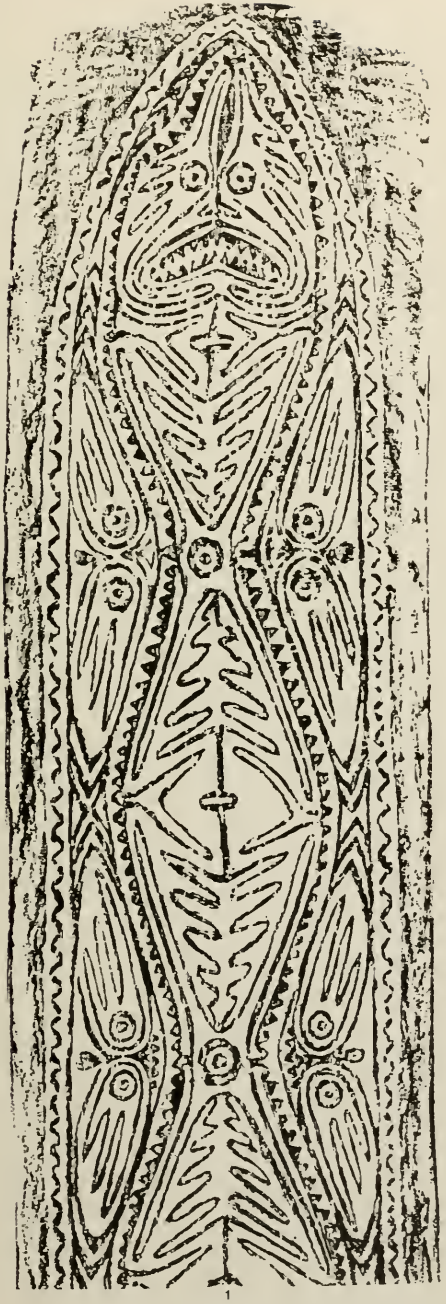
THREE BARK BELTS

The upper ones are resting on those below. A rubbing of the center belt is shown in Plate XXXI, Fig. 2, and of the lowest one (other end of the design) in Plate XXVIII, Fig. 1

THREE BARK BELTS

A rubbing of the opposite end of the lowest belt is shown in Plate XXX, Fig. 2

RUBBINGS GIVING PART OF THE DESIGN ON THREE BARK BELTS



1

2

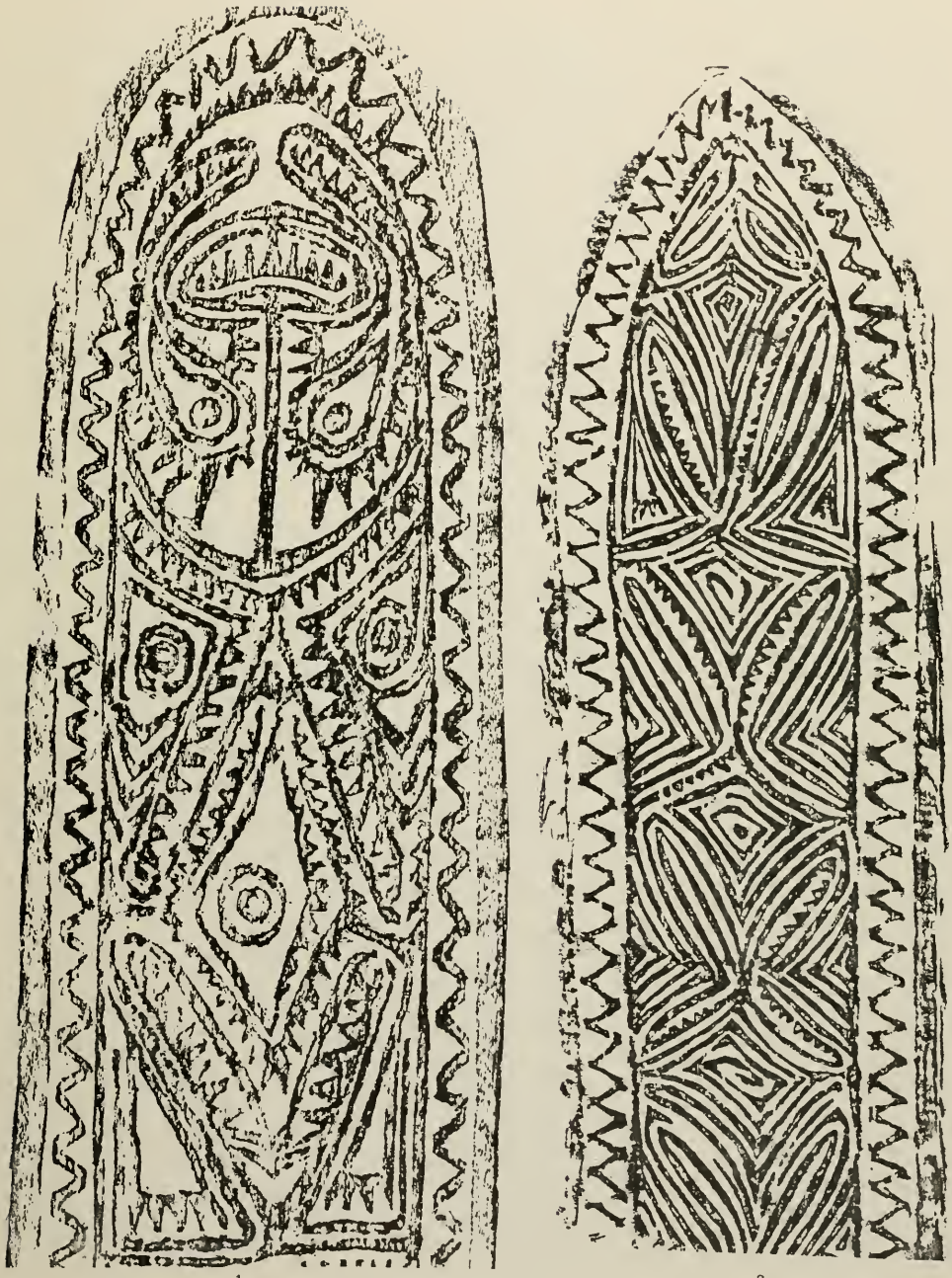
RUBBINGS GIVING PART OF THE DESIGN ON TWO BARK BELTS

Fig. 1 is from the lowest belt of Plate XXV, but gives the other end of the design

1

2

RUBBINGS GIVING PART OF THE DESIGN ON TWO BARK BELTS

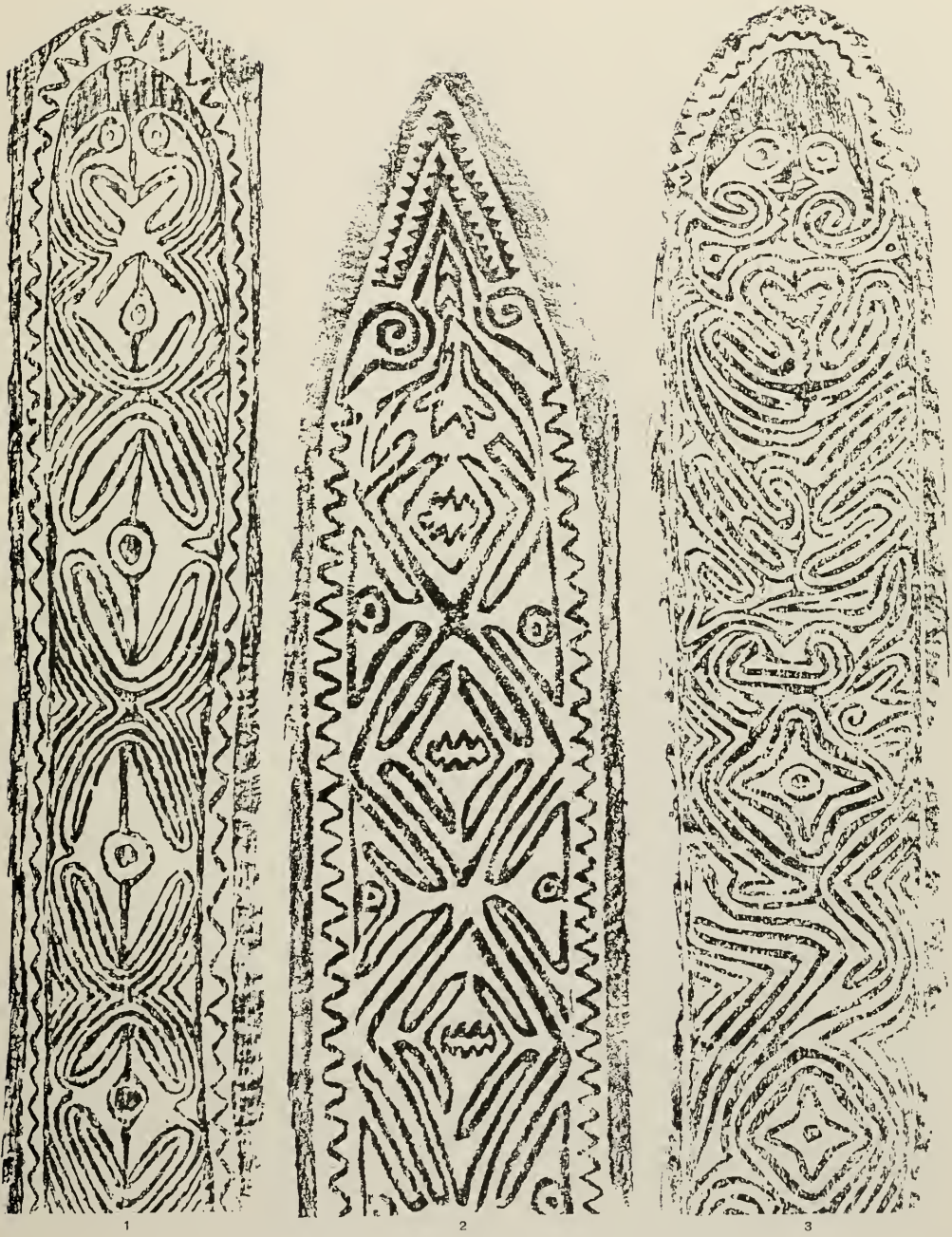


1 2

RUBBINGS GIVING PART OF THE DESIGN ON TWO BARK BELTS

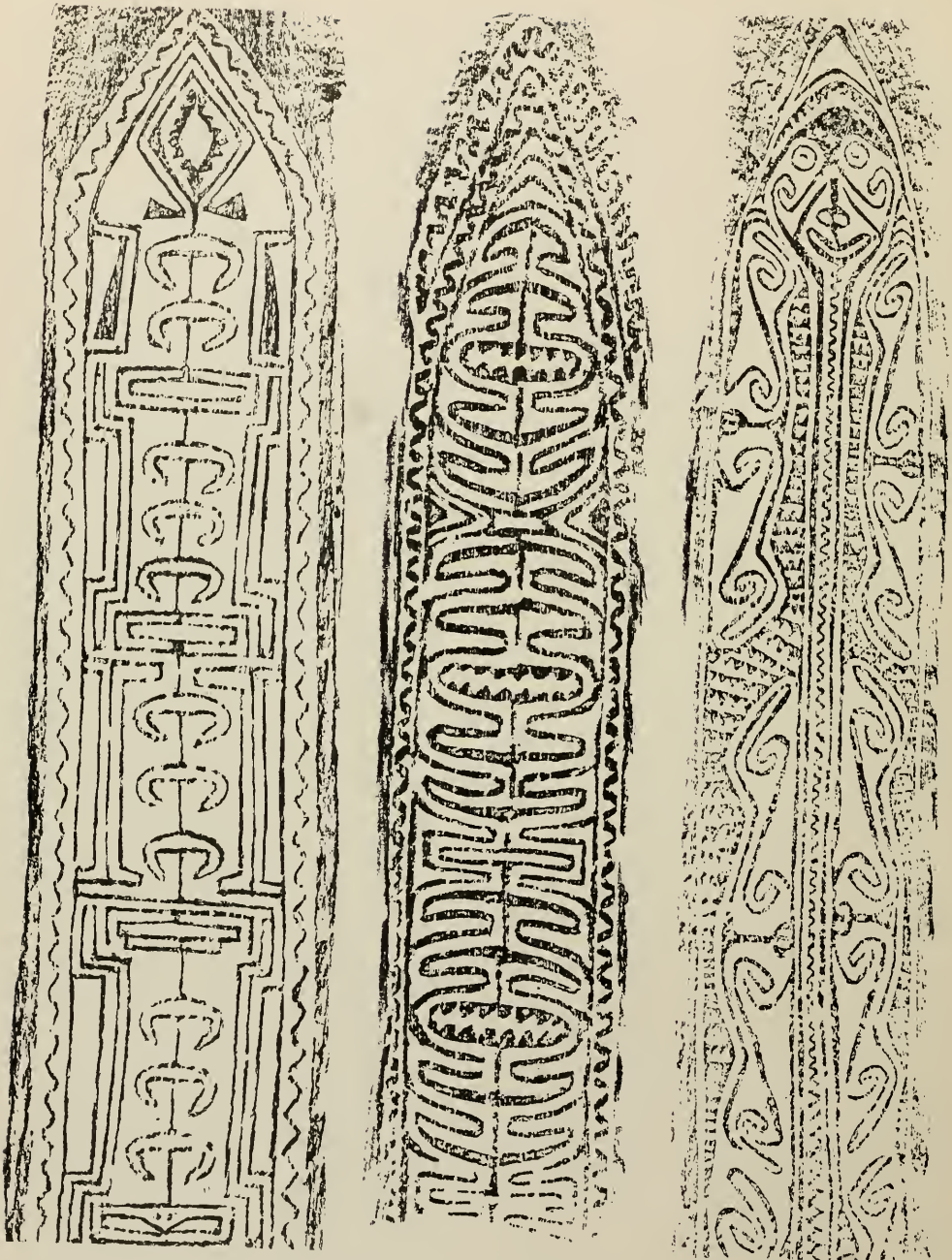
Fig. 2 is from the lowest belt of Plate XXVI, but gives the other end of the design

RUBBINGS GIVING PART OF THE DESIGN ON THREE BARK BELTS
Fig. 2 is from the center belt of Plate XXV



1 2 3

RUBBINGS GIVING PART OF THE DESIGN ON THREE BARK BELTS



1 2 3

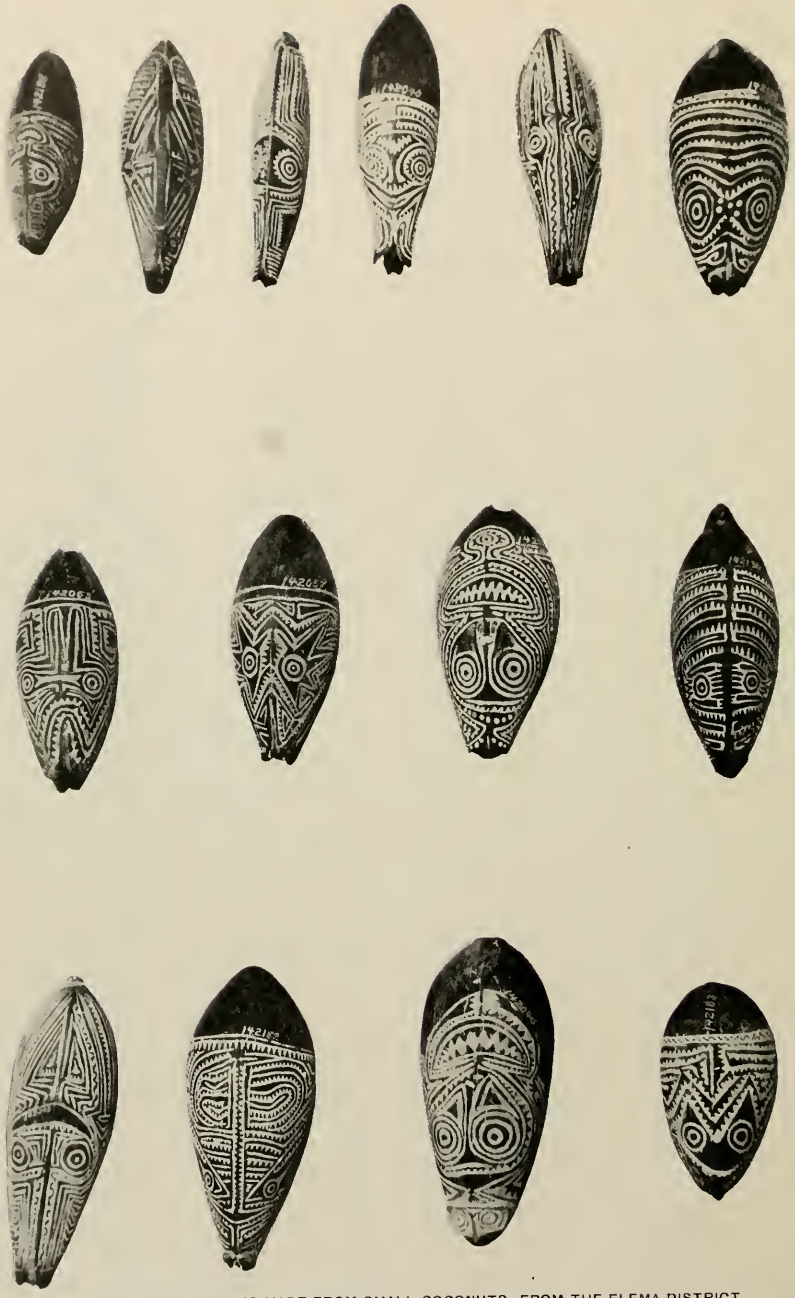
RUBBINGS GIVING PART OF THE DESIGN ON THREE BARK BELTS

1 2 3

RUBBINGS GIVING PART OF THE DESIGN ON THREE BARK BELTS

ORNAMENTED STICKS FROM THE PURARI DELTA
About one-third actual size

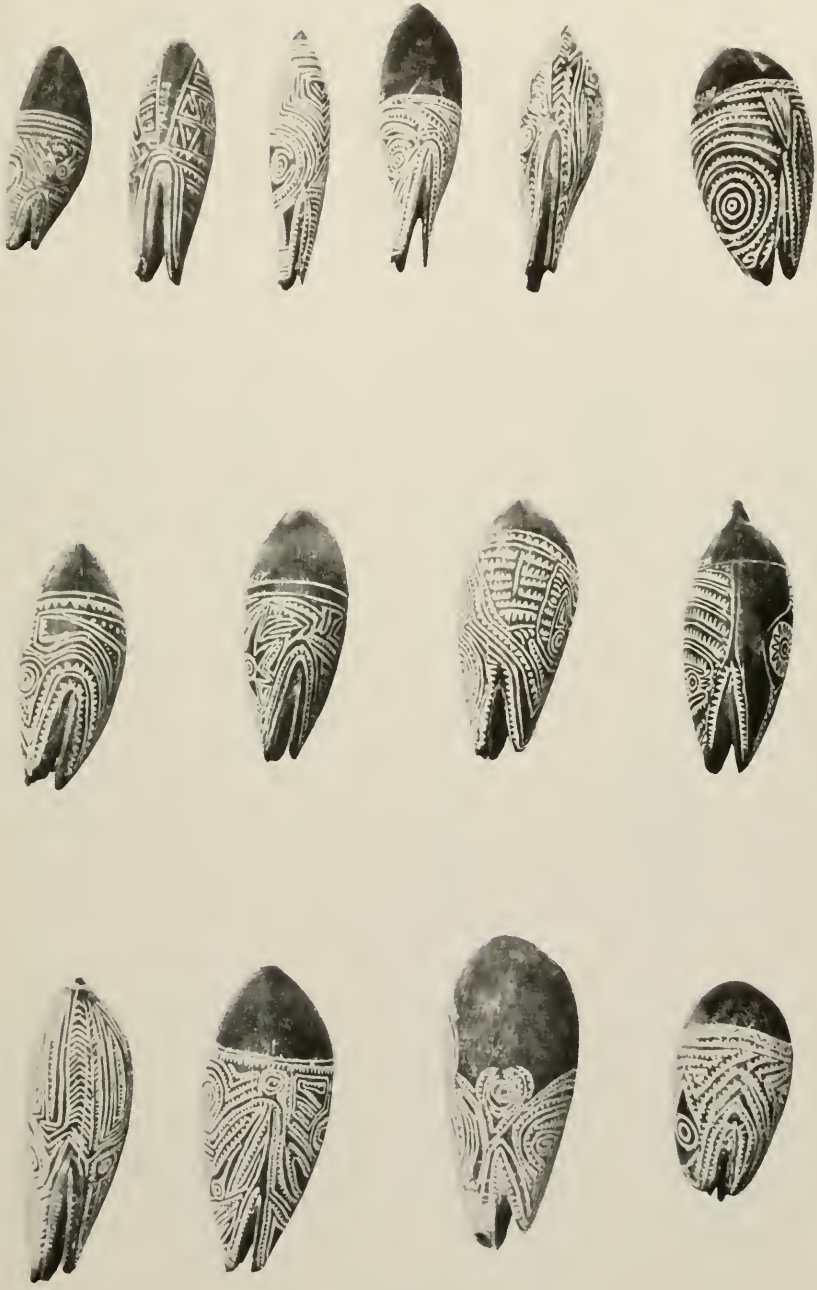
ORNAMENTED COMBS FROM THE PURARI DELTA
About three-fourths actual size



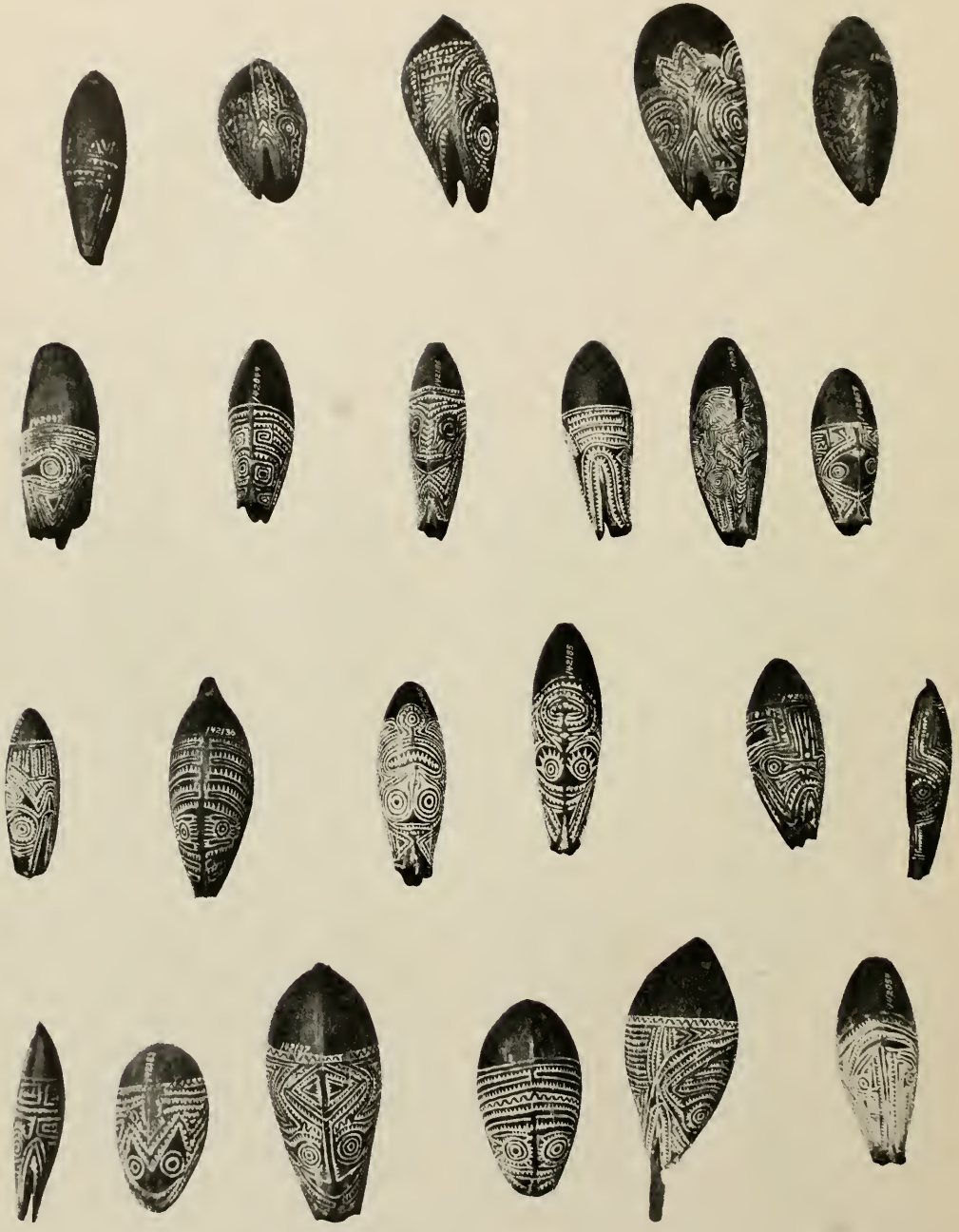
ORNAMENTED CHARMS MADE FROM SMALL COCONUTS, FROM THE ELEMA DISTRICT

Side and back views of these are given in Plates XXXVIII and XL. Such charms are carried when on a journey to ward off danger. They are usually placed in a small bag hung about the neck

About two-thirds actual size



SIDE VIEWS OF CHARMS SHOWN IN PLATE XXXVII
About two-thirds actual size



ORNAMENTED CHARMS SIMILAR TO THOSE OF PLATE XXXVII

About one-half actual size

BACK VIEWS OF CHARMS SHOWN IN PLATE XXXVII
About two-thirds actual size

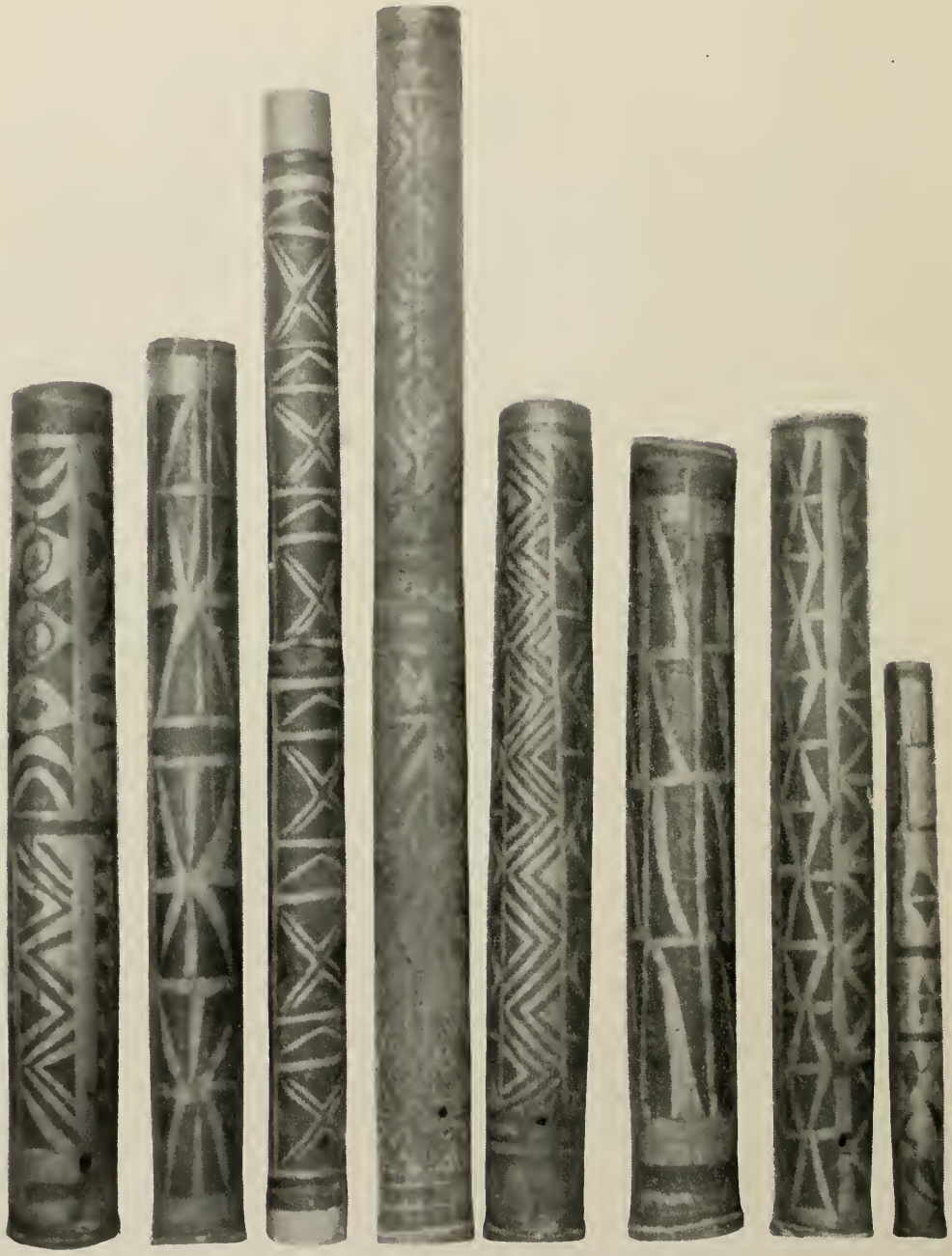
HAND-DRUMS, PURARI DELTA

The design on the title page is from a rubbing of the second drum from the left

About one-fifth actual size

COCONUT-SHELL SPOONS, PURARI DELTA

About two-thirds actual size

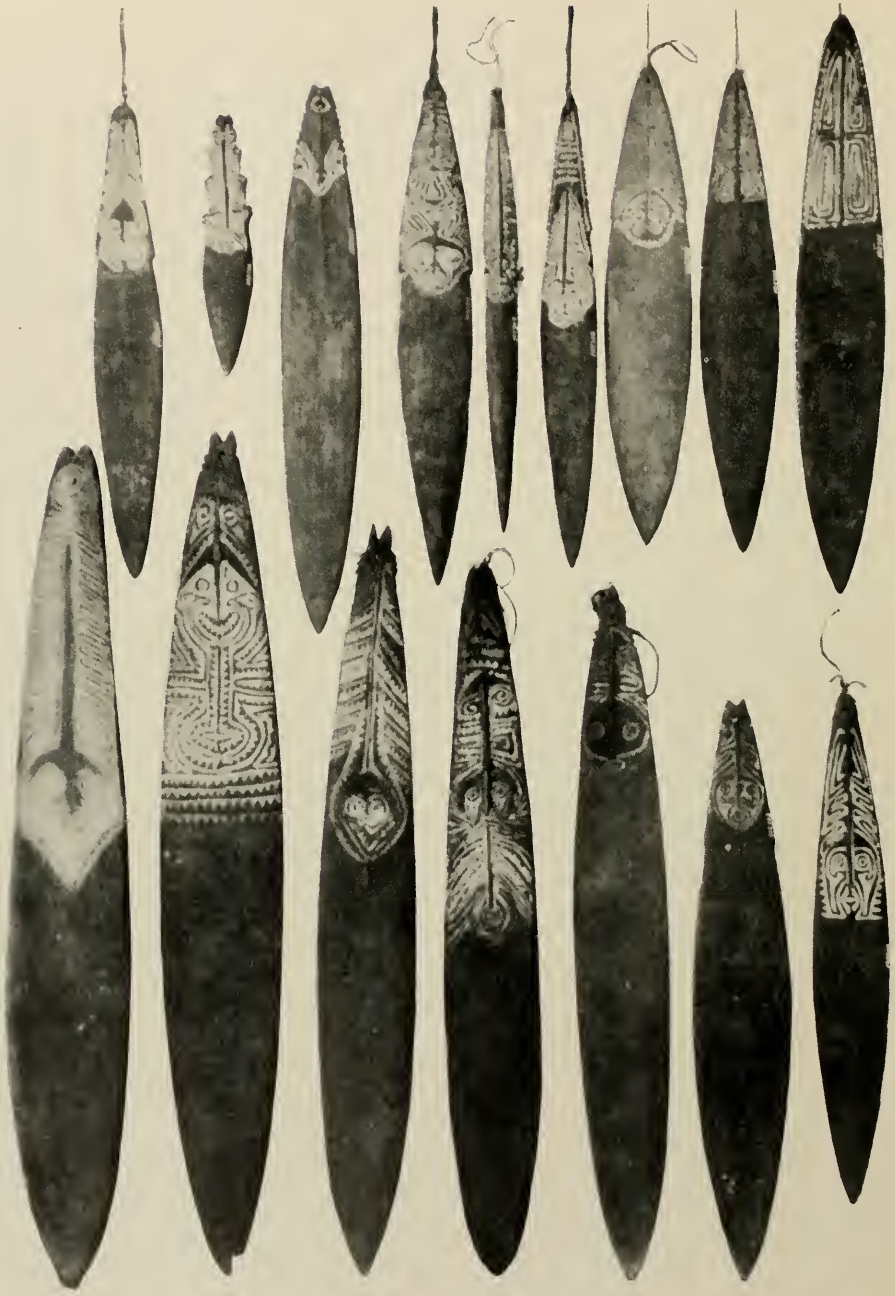


BAMBOO TOBACCO-PIPES, SOUTH COAST, PAPUA

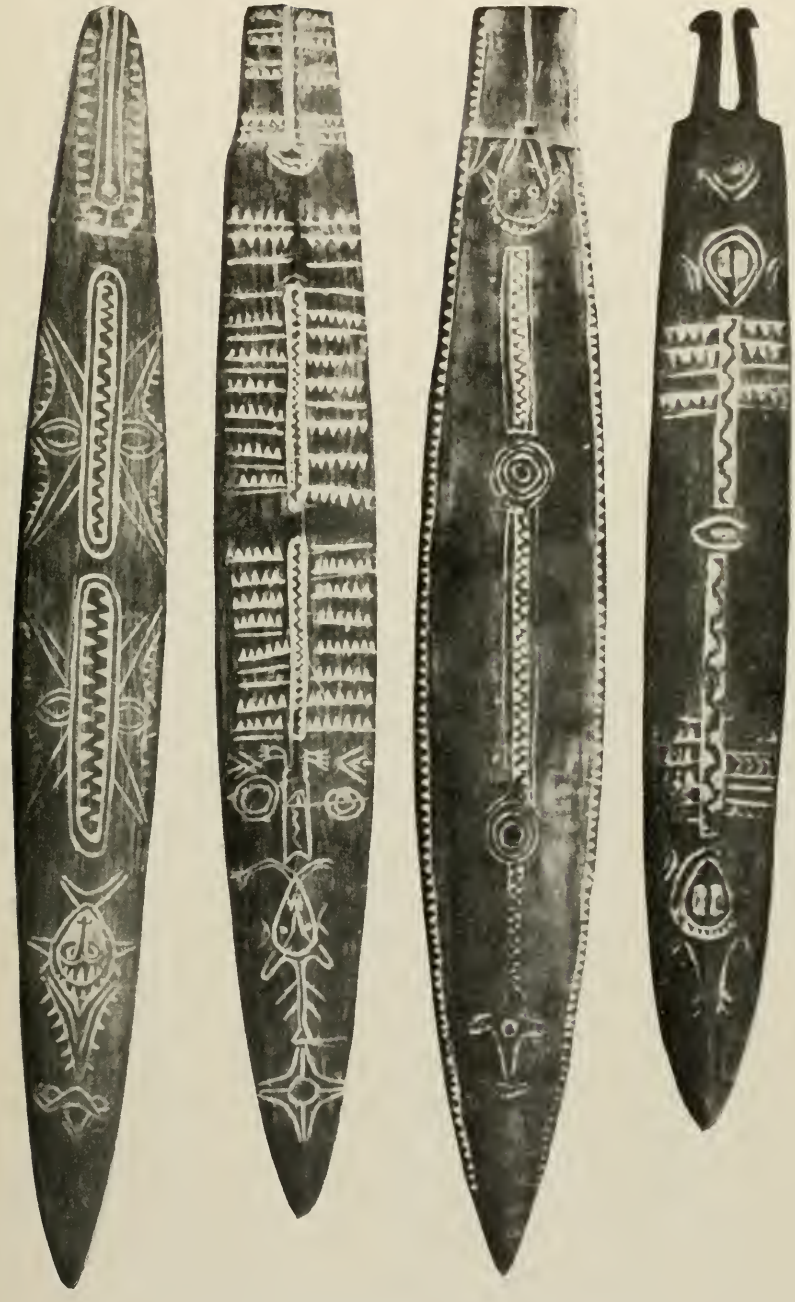
The design is produced by burning or scraping the surface, thus removing the hard outer layer

About one-third actual size

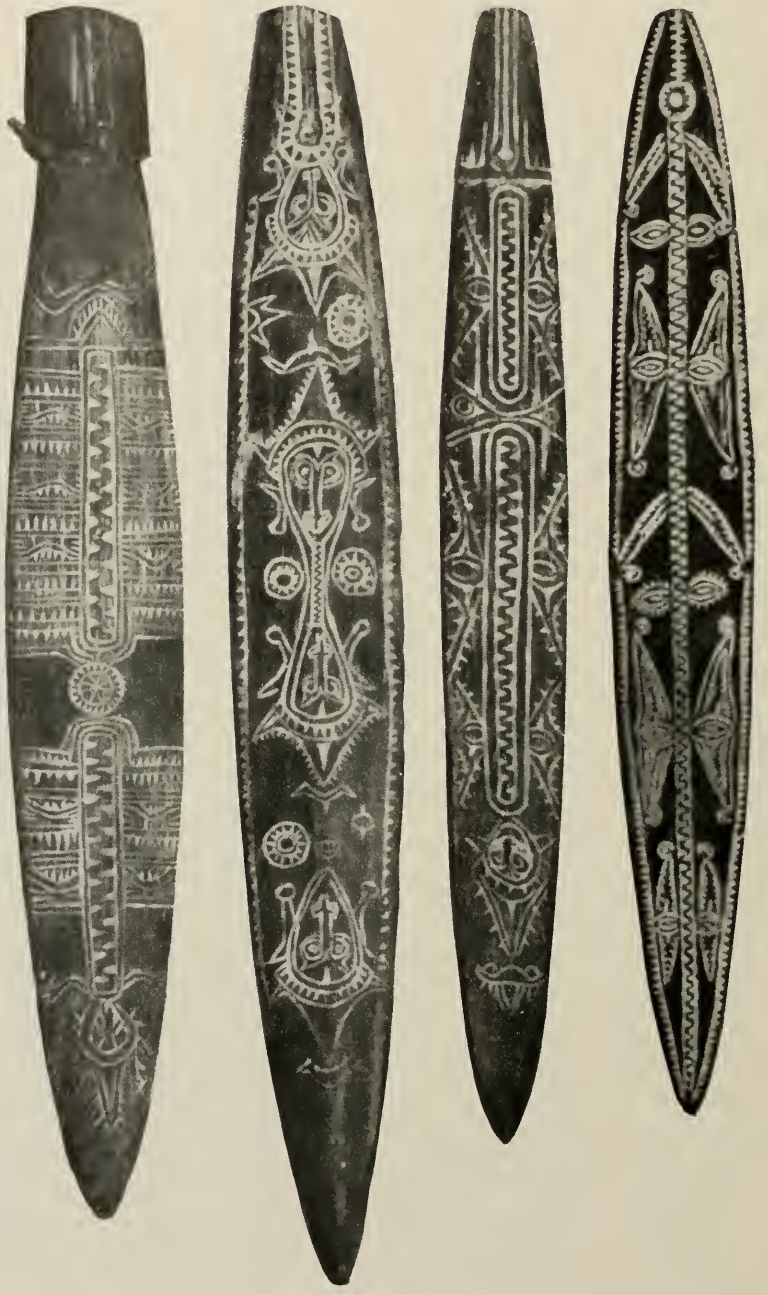
WOODEN ORNAMENTS WORN ON THE HEAD AT CERTAIN DANCES, EASTERN NEW GUINEA
About one-third actual size



BULL-ROARERS FROM KAIVARE, PURARI DELTA
About one-fourth actual size



BULL-ROARERS FROM HUON GULF, NORTHEAST NEW GUINEA
About two-thirds actual size

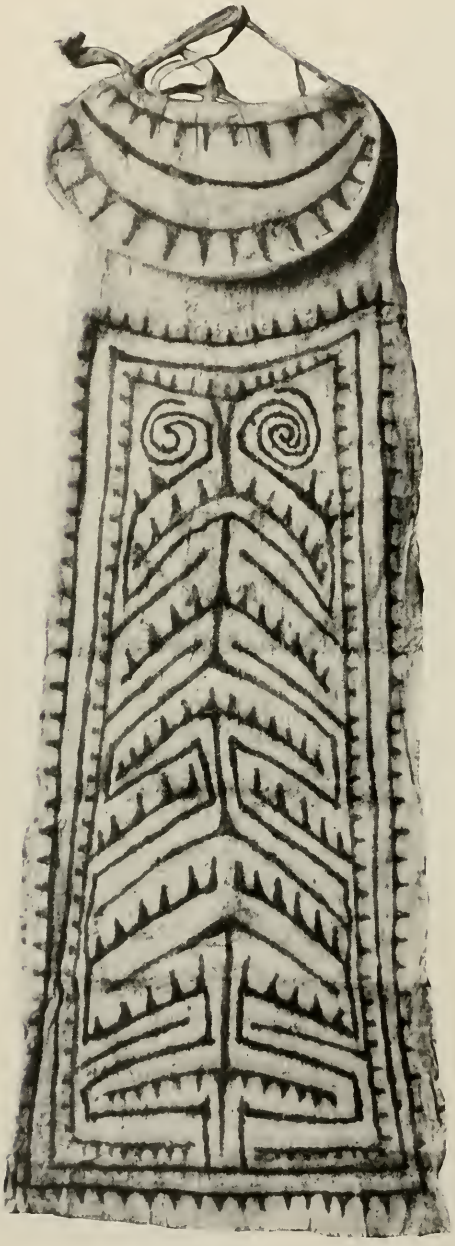


BULL-ROARERS FROM HUON GULF, NORTHEAST NEW GUINEA
About two-thirds actual size

BULL-ROARERS FROM HUON GULF, NORTHEAST NEW GUINEA
About two-thirds actual size

PAINTED ENDS OF MEN'S BARK LOIN CLOTHS, COLLINGWOOD BAY, NORTHEAST COAST
About one-sixth actual size

PAINTED ENDS OF MEN'S BARK LOIN CLOTHS, COLLINGWOOD BAY, NORTHEAST COAST
About one-sixth actual size



1

2

1. BACK ORNAMENT OF PAINTED BARK CLOTH, OROKOLO, ELEMA DISTRICT
2. PAINTED END OF MAN'S BARK LOIN CLOTH, NORTH COAST

About one-fifth actual size

ORNAMENTED WOODEN HOOKS AND FOOD BOWL, MASSIM DISTRICT, EASTERN NEW GUINEA

The hooks are suspended from the roof by a rattan, and bags or baskets of food are hung on them to keep dogs and rats away

About two-fifths actual size